

THE HISTORICITY OF SAKYAMUNI

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LIKE many other great characters of antiquity, the historicity of Sakyamuni has been called into question. Up until the year 1856 doubts were frequently expressed as to whether there really existed such a person as Sakyamuni the Buddha. So well versed a scholar as H. H. Wilson, Professor of Sanscrit at Oxford University was able to say, "It is very uncertain whether such a person ever lived."

The reasons for this spirit of incredulity are not hard to find. The stories of the life of Sakyamuni which are most generally accepted by the Buddhist believers today, are so full of impossible tales of miracles and inconsistencies as to make them absolutely unacceptable to any scientific mind. The figure there portrayed is evidently the product of the pious imagining of the Buddhist disciples of a later day. It is easy to draw the conclusion that, since so little is really known about him, and the stories we have so largely false, in all probability there is no basis for them whatever. If ninety percent is fictitious, why not the whole.

The question cannot be dismissed so easily, however. There still remains the movement of Buddhism to account for. This cannot be done upon the basis of a slow evolution, such as we find taking place in the development of the Vedic religion, or Shinto, through animism and nature worship to more theistic forms. On the contrary, Buddhism belongs very definitely to the type of religions which rise as the result of the work of a founder, whose inspiration and personality, rather than any set of teachings or ceremonies, are the real fountain head. A study of the earliest records of Buddhism reveals a personality, which, in spite of the meagerness of detail, stands out as the dominating and determining character of primitive Buddhism. Were there no other grounds for our belief in the historical existence of

the great founder of Buddhism, I believe that a thoroughly satisfactory case could be made out on the basis of the nature of the system which he founded.

We are not forced to rely upon such arguments alone however, During the present generation data have come to light which make certain that there was such an historical character as Sakyamuni. In the year 1897, Dr. A. Fuhrer, archaeological surveyor of the North-western Provinces and Oudh, published his "Monograph on Buddha Sakyamuni's Birth-place" in the *Archaeological Survey of North India*, Vol. VI, giving an account of the discovery, or more correctly the re-discovery, of the Horse-Pillar, erected by King Asoka to mark the birthplace of the great Buddha, in the Lumbini Grove at Kapilavastu.

The Chinese Scholars, Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsiang, who visited the vicinity of the reputed birth-place of Sakyamuni, near Kapilavastu, in the fifth and seventh centuries A. D., have both left us comparatively clear accounts of having found the spot where the birth took place. Fa Hien says,¹⁷ "Fifty li (8 1/3 miles) east from the city (Kapilavastu) was a garden named Lumbini where the queen (Mahamaya) entered the pond and bathed. Having come forth from the pond on the Northern Bank, after walking twenty paces, she lifted up her hand, laid hold of the branch of a tree and, with her face to the east, gave birth to the heir-apparent. When he fell to the ground, he (immediately) walked seven paces. Two dragon kings appeared and washed the body. At the place where they did so, there was immediately formed a well, and from it, as well as from the above pond, where (the queen) bathed, the monks even now constantly take the water, and drink it.

Hiuen Tsiang¹⁸ has given an account of the Lumbini Garden. He says, "Here is the bathing tank of the Sakyas, the water of which is bright and clear as a mirror, and the surface covered with a mixture of flowers. To the North of this, twenty-four or twenty-five paces, there is an Asoka tree, which is now decayed; this is the place where the Bodhisvattva was born on the eighth day of the second half of the month Vaisakha. . . . East of this is a stupa built

¹⁷See Legge, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms: being an account of the Chinese monk, Fa Hien, of his travels in India and China in search of the Buddhist book of discipline*, Oxford, 1886, p. 67. Also Giles, *Record of Buddhist kingdoms*, translated from Chinese. Shanghai, 1887, p. 51.

¹⁸See Beal's *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang, 1884, Vol. II, p. 24.

by Asoka-Rajah, where the two dragons bathed the body of the prince." A little farther on in the narrative he says, "Close to this there are four stupas to denote the place where the four heavenly kings received the Bodhisattva in their arms. . . . By the side of these stupas and not far from them is a great stone pillar on the top of which is the figure of a horse, which was built by Asoka-rajah. Afterward by the contrivance of a wicked dragon, it was broken off in the middle and fell to the ground. By the side of it is a little river which flows to the south-east. The people of the place call it the river of oil. This is the stream which the Devas caused to appear as a pure and glistening pool for the queen, when she brought forth her child, to wash and purify herself in. Now it is changed and become a river, the stream of which is still unctuous."

These two quotations give us the situation as the two Buddhist scholars found it in the fifth and seventh centuries respectively, when they made their visits to the Lumbini Grove. At the time of their visits the lower portion of the pillar which had originally held the horse-statue, was still standing. Not far away were the four stupas, and near the pillar, the pool, and its oily stream.

With this data before him, it was not difficult for Dr. Fuhrer to identify the place. The remains of the four stupas were still clearly visible, and near them the pillar, which he describes¹⁹ as a "slightly mutilated pillar, rising about ten feet above the ground, and being covered with many records of pilgrims' visits, one of which was incised about 700 A. D." and therefore not long after the record of Hiuen Tsiang. The story thus far, however remains unconvincing. There was no evidence beyond the tradition which the two Chinese monks had picked up, to show that this was in reality erected by Asoka to commemorate the place where the Buddha had been born. The interval of nearly a thousand years gave ample opportunity for traditions of any kind to arise, between the time of King Asoka and the journey of the monks in the seventh century, A. D. From the stories which they tell, it is evident that there was no inscription visible on the pillar at the time of their visits. Dr. Fuhrer, however, dug away the earth around the pillar, and discovered that the base of the pillar was some distance below the surface of the ground as he found it. When the pillar was revealed, it was found to be a "monolith 22 feet 4 inches high, stand-

¹⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 27.

ing upon a masonry platform, and to bear about 9 feet 8 inches from its base a well preserved inscription of the Maruya period, in five lines."²⁰ This inscription which was evidently unknown to the two Chinese travellers, proves the truth of their statement to the effect that the pillar had been erected by King Asoka. The fact seems to be that, at the time of their visit, the debris had already accumulated to a place above where the inscription was, though the tradition as to the origin of the pillar was still well known. The inscription is in Megadhi of the third century, B. C. and reads as follows. "King Piyadasi, beloved of the gods, having been anointed twenty years, came himself and worshipped saying: 'here Buddha Sakyamuni was born.' And he caused to be made a stone (capital) bearing a horse, and he caused (this) stone pillar to be erected. Because here the Blessed One was born, the village of Lumbini has been made free of taxes and a recipient of wealth."

This evidence seems indisputable. Here must be the spot which was pointed out to King Asoka about the year 239,²¹ which would be 238 years after the death of Sakyamuni²² as the spot where he had been born. The upper portion of the pillar, bearing the horse, had not been discovered when Dr. Fuhrer's monograph was published, but probably lies below the debris. There is a likelihood that it was broken off by lightning, which the Chinese Buddhists ascribe to the anger of "dragons", thus giving rise to the story told by the two monks. The top of the pillar may some day be found.

We have, therefore, a very satisfactory reason for believing that within less than two and a half centuries of the death of Sakyamuni, the place of his birth was known and accepted, and apparently had been ever since his death. The evidence for this latter statement we shall now proceed to examine. It is found in the story of King Asoka's visit to Kapilavastu, as told in the Divyavadana.²³

This work tells us that Sthavira Upagupta, the fifth Elder of Northern Buddhism, and the converter of Asoka to Buddhist belief, was invited by that monarch to come and visit him at his capital, Pataliputra. Upon his arrival, the story proceeds, Asoka said to him, "You who resemble the Master, you who are the sole eye of the Universe, and the chief interpreter of the Sacred Law, be my

²⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 27.

²¹Asoka came to the throne twenty years before, viz. 259 B. C.

²²The most generally accepted date for Sakya's death is 477 B. C.

²³Edited by E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, Cambridge, 1886.

refuge, Reverend Sir, and give me your command!" "I shall hasten, great sage, to obey thy voice." Upagupta replied. "O great King, the Lord, the Blessed Tathagata, has entrusted to me as well as to you the depository of the Law. Let us make every effort to preserve that which the Leader of the World has entrusted to us, when he was in the midst of his disciples." The king then fell at the feet of Upagupta, and said, "This, O Sthavira, is my desire: I wish to visit, honour, and mark by a sign, for the benefit of remote posterity all the spots where the Blessed Buddha has sojourned". The Sthavira replied, "Very well, O great king, this thought of thine is good. I shall go this day to show you the spots where the venerable Buddha resided." They thereupon proceeded with a large and gorgeous equipage to Lumbini, where the Sthavira Upagupta, pointing out the place, said to the King, "Here, O great king, the Lord was born; at this site, precious to behold, the first monument in honour of the Buddha should be consecrated." Asoka not only carried out this intention, but, the story tells us, presented one hundred gold coins to the people of the country as well.

This story is of value chiefly in the fact that it indicates to us that the site of the birthplace of the Buddha was a well-known spot to the leaders of Buddhism even before the erection of the pillar by Asoka. This is of course quite to be expected, in view of the direct and definite charge attributed to the Blessed One himself, that his followers should keep sacred in his memory four holy places, the scenes of the most important events in his life. The Mahaparinibbana Sutta,²⁴ which of all the stories of the life of the great founder is generally conceded to be among the oldest, gives the list of four places which must thus be kept holy: (1) The birthplace of the Tathagata Kapilavastu; (2) The place of his enlightenment, Buddh-gara or Naranjara; (3) The Deer-park, near Benares, where he first proclaimed the Law; and (4) Kusinara, the place where he obtained Nirvana. It then proceeds; "All believers, brethren and sisters of the Order, or devout men and women, who shall die while they, with believing heart are journeying on such a pilgrimage, shall be reborn after death, when the body shall dissolve in the happy realms of heaven." With such a declaration made by the Blessed One himself, and going back, most certainly, to the very earliest traditions, it is scarcely conceivable that the birthplace of Sakya-

²⁴S. B. E., XI, p. 90-1.

muni should have been forgotten, or the continuous stream of tradition in regard to the authentic spot have been broken, right back to the very earliest period of Buddhist history. We are fairly safe therefore, in claiming that we have unbroken and well-authenticated evidence as to the birthplace, and the consequent historicity of the great Founder of Buddhism. The burden of proof is upon those who would claim the origin of Buddhism in a Hindu-Sun-myth, or some other such story. The necessity of explaining away the facts which Dr. Fuhrer's explorations have revealed will greatly add to their task. In fact it seems to make such a position untenable.

There still remains one question however, which seems to present difficulties in the way of accepting the data given above. How is it that, if this birthplace were so well known by the Buddhists, it was not marked in some way before the time of Asoka, and later was allowed to fall into decay and neglect, so that even the inscription on the pillar was, for a thousand years or more, covered up by debris, and unknown?

The answer to the first part of this question is found in the fact that the Order founded by Sakyamuni was composed of semi-ascetic mendicants who had definitely given up wealth and material prosperity, and were therefore financially incapable of any elaborate recognition of the sacred places. It was only when the Rajah Asoka with large resources at his disposal, became a devotee, that the building of Stupas and the erection of monoliths became possible. Before this time the pious Buddhist pilgrim was satisfied to visit the sacred places, unmarked by monuments, and leave there, perhaps, his simple tribute of devotion. The beautiful palace which had once been there, and the garden where the sacred event had taken place, were all a scene of desolation, as they have been, indeed ever since. For during the lifetime of Sakymuni, Kapilavastu, the capital of the Sakya Clan, was destroyed by Vidudabaha, the son of the king of Kosala, and the Sakya clan almost entirely exterminated, in consequence of an insult given by the Sakyans to the people of Kosala.²⁵ Fa Hien, who visited Kapilavastu about 46 A. D. says of the city at that time, "In it there was neither King nor people. All was mound and desolation. Of inhabitants there were only some monks and a score or two of families of common people. . . . On the roads

²⁵See note at end of chapter.

people have to be on their guard against wild elephants and lions, and should not travel incautiously."²⁶

Similar testimony is also borne by Hiuen Thiang, a couple of centuries later.²⁷ It seems probable, therefore, that there has been no effort since the time of Sakyamuni himself to rebuild, to any large extent at any rate, the site of the ancient kingdom. The general neglect which has been accorded the sacred place, even since Asoka's time is due, in part perhaps, to the fact that it has been a deserted land, with but few inhabitants. This however, would scarcely have been possible had it not been for the general decline of Buddhism throughout India soon after the period of Asoka. While there have been occasional pilgrimages from other Buddhist lands, such for instance as those just mentioned, these apparently have been rare. Buddhism in India has almost ceased to be. Mahayana Buddhism, which has developed in the lands farther to the east, has been much less concerned with keeping up these sacred pilgrimages than were the disciples of the first few centuries. In respect of the three other sacred sites, there is the additional fact that they were not marked by any enduring monument, and are therefore less clearly authenticated. As anyone familiar with sacred sites in the orient is well aware, unless there is very definite evidence of early date, little credence can be placed upon the traditions which identify the various sacred places. What has already been brought forward, however, is of such a nature as to appear indisputable, and to fix with as large a degree of certainty as we could well expect, not only the fact of the historicity of Sakya but the actual place of his birth as well.²⁸ Unless new and unexpected data to the contrary should be discovered, there is little likelihood of the matter being again called in question.

²⁶Legge, *op. cit.*, 64, 68, and Giles, *op. cit.*, 49-50.

²⁷Beal, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 13-14.

²⁸Note on the Fall of Kapilavastu. There is a legend to the effect that the King of Kosala asked for one of the Sakya women in marriage. The Sakya nobles considering this beneath the dignity of their clan, sent the bastard daughter of a slave woman instead. This insult was avenged as told above. The King of Kosala was in turn defeated by Agatasattu, son of King Bimbisara of Magadha, about 491 B. C., and the influence of Magadha made supreme.